

## FEATURE STORY

# FORMER WALK-ON RINGS UP IMPRESSIVE NUMBERS FINAL YEAR AT MORRIS BROWN

Corey Bell was trying to become a contributor to the Morris Brown program. The last thing he was worried about was becoming a starter. Even further was being a star.

"I decided I wanted to do what's best for the team. I wasn't trying to become a standout or anything," Bell said. "Everything just sort of fell into place."

To hear Bell say that and then see his numbers for the year are two entirely dif-

ferent things. Bell picked off seven passes, good enough to be tied fifth nationally. The pickoffs an impressive number considering he plays free safety. Bell also recorded 77 tackles and probably led his team for the most punishing hits unloaded in the secondary. The honors landed Bell a second-team All-Southern Intercollegiate Athletic Conference.

Not bad for someone who played at a Catholic high school in Atlanta. In fact,

they're excellent numbers for a walk-on.

In 1990, Bell decided not to play football after high school days were over at St. Pius High School in Atlanta. While enrolled at Morris Brown, Bell supported himself by working at nights after classes were over. Then he realized he couldn't sit on the sidelines anymore.

"When I came on school, all I wanted to do was be a regular student and I had to work," said Bell, who did not receive any sort of financial aid his first year at the Atlanta college. "It took a sacrifice — quitting my job — to come out, but I wanted to play football."

Wolverines coach Greg Thompson didn't know what to expect when Bell came out to play. He knew this walk-on had size, but wondered whether or not Bell would have the patience to sit behind some experienced safeties.

"The biggest thing I was worried about was his lack of experience because he always had the talent," Thompson said. "But throughout the three years he's been on the team, Corey has grown in his overall knowledge of the game."

What Thompson did like about Bell is his combination of size and speed. Bell bench presses 345 pounds and runs a 4.3 40-yard dash to go along with his 40-inch vertical leap. According to defensive backs coach Willie Williams, Bell is also one of the hardest-working players on the team and has set the tone for the Wolverines secondary all year.

Bell, who only had two career starts coming into his senior season, made the most of his senior season. In his first four games, he picked off six passes. Bell made a name for himself in the game against Tuskegee, when he recorded 12 tackles and a pair of interceptions. But Bell believes he was making an impact on the game before he became a pickoff artist.

"Being able to rotate from strong safety to free safety, I felt I've always made an impact on the game, even during my first start," said Bell, referring to his debut in the Gridiron Classic against Clark Atlanta last year. "I let my corners know I got their backup, so they can go out and take some chances. That way we go out and be more aggressive."

The personal transformation from solid backup to valued starter began for Bell this summer. Bell spent a lot of hot summer days in the Georgia Dome covering Georgia Tech receivers Greg Lester and Cedric Thomas. Bell also got the opportunity to learn from some of the great corners of the game such as former San Francisco 49ers cornerback Eric Wright and 14-year veteran Everson



Corey Bell



Photo by Wade Nash

Morris Brown double bac Bell intercepts a pass in the first half of the Gridiron Classic. While teammate Maurice Dix and Clark WR Terry Becham reach for the pass in vain.

Walls.

With his confidence level soaring to unprecedented levels, Bell knew his last season would be a special one.

"The most impressive thing about Corey is that he was steady in all his games this year," Thompson said. "Many of the people around here consider the Tuskegee game his best performance this year, but I think all his games have been great."

While his numbers tailed off at the end of the year, it can be attributed to more teams — and players — being cognizant of Bell on the field. Several coaches have told Thompson they have redesigned their game plans on not going to Bell's side of the field.

"He breaks so well on the ball, it's hard not to pass and not see near the ball by the time it reaches a receiver," Savannah State coach Joe Crosby said. "He's an intelligent player who could have a future at the next level."

But excuse Bell if he does not have those type of dreams. With graduation coming up in May for the business administration major, Bell's biggest concern is trying to get into a graduate school.

"I would like to play in the NFL. Who wouldn't? But right now I have other goals in life," Bell said. "The most important thing is getting that degree. If playing football after school is there, fine. But I'm not going to bank on it."

"After all, it wasn't like I came here on an athletic scholarship."

— Michael Johnson